DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 509 FL 019 103

AUTHOR Jabbour-Lagocki, Judith
TITLE Prepositions of Position: An Analysis for Practical Application in the Classroom.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 7p.; In: Fremdsprachendidaktik und Innovations in der Lehrerbildung. Havranek, G. and Stefan, F. Vienna: Bohlav Verlag, 1990. p162-167.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); *Grammatical Acceptability; *Prepositions; Second Language Instruction; *Visual Aids

ABSTRACT

Learners of English as a Second Language are frequently confused about when to use prepositions. While some explanations offered in textbooks are satisfactory, more often they are unsatisfactory or completely lacking. An analysis of explanations revealed the underlying relationships represented in prepositions of location or proximity. With English prepositions of proximity ("by, near, next to, beside"), the degree of distance expressed by each can be thought of as forming a continuum from "next to" to "near." It is useful for students to experience concrete distances between objects in the classroom or use visual aids, and to solidify the concepts by making statements using the prepositions. Another group of prepositions often found difficult includes "at, on, and in." Exploiting the three-dimensional aspects of prepositions may help explain their use in expressing spatial relationships, and subsequently their temporal relationships. Testing the understanding of these prepositions can be accomplished by having students ask each other questions about pictures, make contrastive pairs, or write a group story in which each student adds a sentence using a new preposition. It is important for teachers to understand that examples alone, without sufficient semantic explanation and opportunities to transfer the knowledge to new contexts, will be ineffective in teaching language learners. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Judith Jabbour-Lagocki

PREPOSITIONS OF POSITION: AN ANALYSIS FOR PRACTICAL APPLICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

How near *is* near? Just where *is* "at"? Second language learners consistently ask for explanations about when to use prepositions. Understanding these semantic bridges in a second language is complicated simply because the explicit or implicit relationships they express in one language can rarely be expressed in a second language on a one-to-one basis. Although there are some relationships that coincide, the area of commonality is often very small and the divergences very large. Interference will also hinder mastery of some prepositions if the phonological and orthographic picture and the semantics are similar as for example *by* in English and *bei* in German.

Oftentimes there are satisfactory explanations about the use of some prepositions, more often, however, none. What needs to be done is to go beyond the level of presenting isolated examples of preposition usage to L_2 learners, as is usually done, and instead to analyze usage in a variety of situations to arrive at the underlying relationship prepositions show. This information can then be passed on to the L_2 learner.

Unsatisfactory explanations in grammar books and in dictionaries surrounding the use of prepositions of position that prove difficult for L_2 learners (at, on, in, by, next to, near, alongside (of), beside) prompted me to take a closer look at just which relationships these albeit short but important words refer to. By combining the various explanations found in resource books and using intuition, I was able to arrive at the underlying relationships that these prepositions show. What follows is this analysis and examples of its application in teaching.

The use in English of prepositions that express proximity - *by, near, next to, beside, alongside (of)* is difficult for a non-native speaker to understand because the degree of distance expressed by each preposition must be thought of as forming a continuum from *next to* to *near*. The difficulty in explaining which preposition to use in a given context seems greatest when a delimited enclosed area such as a classroom is involved as opposed to an area that is wider in scope as the outdoors.

Next to shows the relationship between two subjects with no noteworthy distance between.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED383509

FL019103

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Judith Jabbour-Lagocki

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

OX - Come and sit down *next to* me.
The bakery is right *next to* the supermarket.

By refers to a relationship where there is no significant distance between the two subjects.

O X - Sharon placed the books on the floor *by* the chair.
The house was *by* the river and was often flooded after heavy rains.

Near expresses the idea of a limited distance between two subjects.

O X - I parked my car *near* the university so I don't have far to walk.
The bus stop is *near* my house, only about two minutes away.

These two prepositions seem to provide an L_2 learner with the most difficulty because of the similarity of their content and their scalar relationship until it becomes clear just what the degree of distance between two subjects is that native speakers refer to when they choose one over the other.

In *alongside (of)* and *beside*, a lateral relationship is inherent in addition to proximity. *Beside* combines *by + side*; *alongside (of)*, *along + side*. Whereas *beside* implies a point, *alongside* implies the length with both subjects of the relationship having some side or laterality they can share as a point of reference and a negligible amount of distance between them. Basically, these two prepositions can be used interchangeably provided that both subjects share laterality.

> The car is parked *beside/alongside (of)* the curb.
> (The car has a side which can relate to the "side" of the curb with a point of the length being implied.)
> Place the desk *alongside (of)/beside* the bookcase please.
> (Both the desk and the bookcase share a length which acts as the point of reference.)

When referring to persons, a certain sense of familiarity or intimacy is involved when *beside* is used.

> Come, sit *beside* me.
> (An invitation of friendliness, of perhaps wanting to share something.)

In my mind, *Come, sit down next to me* fails to convey this same intimate tone.

Here it should also be pointed out that students frequently have difficulty in distinguishing between the pairs *near/near to*, *near/nearby*, *next/next to*. However, consideration of this problem does not fall within the scope of this paper.

To teach the concept of proximity I have found it useful to let the learners literally experience the concept of distance by having each learner place on the desk before him two objects such as pencils, erasers, etc. By going from *next to* to *near* and moving the two objects away from each other, the learner can see the distance involved. In my experience even advanced learners should each make a statement such as

The pencil is next to the eraser

to concretize this concept.

Learners need to experience the degree of proximity expressed by these prepositions in a variety of contexts. Therefore the next step would be to refer to objects inside the classroom.

Neighborhoods familiar to all learners in a class, in our case the surroundings of the university, provide the context for further exercises. Describing and identifying are useful tasks in this context, as is establishing the extent of shared knowledge as illustrated in the following examples:

(1) A: The Italian restaurant is *next to* Konsum.
B: No, it isn't. It's *next to* the bank.

(2) A: How can I find the tennis courts?
B: They're *by* the university in X Street.

(3) A: It's not all that far! It's just nearby.
B: Do you mean the house *near* the Italian restaurant?
A: No, the house *next to* the park, across from the restaurant.
B: Oh, now I know. You're right. It's not all that far away.

Pictures, of course are also useful. Andrew Wright's *1000 Pictures for Teachers to Copy* (1984) is especially so since each learner has a copy of the same picture. A fill-in-the-blank type exercise can also provide the opportunity to discuss why several answers for one blank are possible.

Another group of position prepositions often difficult for L_2 learners is *at*, *on* and *in*. The one-, two- and three-dimensional aspects of these prepositions are helpful in understanding their use in expressing spatial relationships (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1983: 259; Quirk et al. 1985: 673):

> Pat is waiting *at* the corner. (one dimension: a point)
> Pat is waiting *on* the beach. (two dimensions: length + width = area)
> Pat is waiting *in* her house. (three dimensions: length + width + height = volume; of greater range than related by *at* or *on*: *in* France/*in* Athens)

Using *at* in certain contexts focuses the action on a particular activity, reducing the place mentioned to a point of reference instead of a three-dimensional spatial unit. We are all familiar with the semantic differences between

> Regina is *in* Innsbruck. (visiting)
> Regina is *at* Innsbruck. (studying)

Closer observation shows that *at* is also used restrictively in other analogous contexts.

> Joyce is *at* the hospital. (working/visiting, but *not* as a patient)
> Richard is *at* the movies. (viewing a film)
> Let's get something *at* the supermarket. (shopping)
> She's *at* it again. (doing something that's attracting attention)
> Norm *is working* in Chicago *at* Morton's.
> We *ate at* a fashionable restaurant last night.

If we pay attention, we will see this relationship of *particular action + place* as conveyed by *at* again and again. Using other prepositions is syntactically possible in some of the above examples, but the semantics will change. A detailed discussion of such change lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Once learners are familiar with the spatial aspects of *at*, *on* and *in*, it then becomes easier for them to understand the use in *temporal* relationships.

> Let's meet *at* 2 o'clock. (a temporal range confined to a point in time)
> Let's meet *on* Tuesday. (a temporal range delimited by 0 and

24)
I'm going to Hāvana *in* the summer. (a temporal range of greater magnitude than 24 hours but delimited as *in the summer/in March*)

A teaching unit involving this group could also include *at the end*, *on the end (of)*, *in the end*, which closely parallel the one, two, three dimensions of the prepositions involved.

At the end of the story, Ann does not return. (point)
On the end of the string of cars was a strikingly beautiful black MG. (length)
In the end, we decided to go anyway. (convergence of several points)

To show they understand the use of these prepositions, learners can ask each other questions about pictures (see Wright) that require an answer in which the temporal or spatial facet of *at*, *in*, *on* must be used. Such well-known tasks as "find the differences" or "same or different" or "which one do you mean" have proved useful. Learners eagerly play games even at the university level and Friederike Klippel (1984: 178) provides one in "Our Room" where learners work in pairs manipulating bits of paper representing furniture to furnish a room. Although it is rather tedious cutting out minuscule pieces of furniture, the effort is well worth it! However, be sure to collect the pieces after the activity is completed!

Those learners who have grasped the meanings and can use them correctly and easily then make contrastive pairs to discuss the differences behind such examples as:

We were *in* a restaurant when it began to rain. (not necessarily eating)
We were (eating) *at* Demeter's when it began to rain.

A fill-in-the-blank type exercise can serve this purpose as well.

Another useful exercise testing usage and developing awareness is writing a group story. A sheet of paper with a list of prepositions and with the beginning line of a story is passed from learner to learner. Each one must add a sentence using a preposition that has not been used. Others may be repeated, but in each sentence, a new one must be used. Some first liners that have been used successfully are:

- This must be the place, but I'm early - or am I late? No one else is here!
- I was born - I can't remember! Where? Let me see ...
- Let's go! The time has come for us to ...

This exercise works just as well with pairs, and sometimes even better.

By the time they have reached this learning stage, the future teachers will realize that it is not sufficient to present learners with illustrations of preposition use when the semantics involved are left unexplained. In presenting the specific semantics as discussed above, a learner's field of linguistic vision is being expanded and he is able to create more relationships within the vocabulary he masters than if he is being presented with a single prepositional phrase with little or no possibility for transfer to other situations.

References

CELCE-MURCIA, M. & LARSEN-FREEMAN, D., 1983, *The grammar book. An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Rowley: Newbury House.

KLIPPEL, F., 1984, *Keep talking. Communicative activities for language teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.

QUIRK, R., GREENBAUM, S., LEECH, G., SVARTVIK, J., 1985, *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.

WRIGHT, A., 1984, *1000 pictures for teachers to copy*. London: Collins ELT.